

Abstract

The Sum of the Parts

by

Austin Sheppard

April, 2010

Director: Hanna Jubran

SCULPTURE AREA

The intent of this thesis report is to analyze, through my figurative sculpture, the various means through which science is currently exploring to reshape the human being, and then address the potential social and cultural effects.

The thesis will examine how these ideas are incorporated and evidenced in my sculpture. In this way the writing will seek to avoid getting bogged down in scientific theory and practice. The aforementioned topics will serve as a basis for the argument that is at the core of the work. This report describes the body of work as metaphoric representations of a variety of scientific practices and their effect on the human psyche.

THE SUM OF THE PARTS

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Master of Fine Arts in Sculpture

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For Grandpa

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INTRODUCTION

I believe mankind is approaching a scientific crossroad, one that will fundamentally change who we are as a species. Those that view this as the next logical step in our evolution will allow tunnel vision to preclude any ability to recognize divergent paths. Humanity time and again has proven itself to march unwaveringly in a straight line, driving onward to a horizon, seeking that which lies beyond view. Often science fiction becomes science fact.

The “Human Condition” as it has become known, is largely responsible for mankind’s irresistible drive to advance itself. However, humanity can hardly be faulted for possessing so great a desire for self-improvement. Herein lies our conundrum; at what point should the human race decide “enough is enough”, and should we even come to such a conclusion in the first place? Such a broad topic lies beyond the scope of a single body of work. Herein I pare it down to its most fundamentally basic form, “self”. I will discuss improvement focusing on the actual “self”, meaning in this context the physical human body.

CONCEPT

My figurative sculpture explores the ramifications of handling the human race as a large-scale Frankensteinian experiment. At times the work examines effects on the individual, and in other instances consequences to humanity as a whole.

The figures themselves are constructed and altered, a reference to the way scientists are now altering the actual human body. They also exist in various states of completion, in some instances presented perpetually under construction, and other times seeming complete and functional. It is also of note that the figures are often restricted and confined within some sort of superstructure, a warning against an increasing technological dependence.

My sculpture addresses the multitude of ways that a human body may be modified and, in some instances, created from scratch. The resultant Beings are perceived to have a detached, soulless quality, although in some situations they are suggested to possess uniquely human characteristics despite displaying physical qualities that identify them as not being of biological origin.

Individual pieces hail from an unidentifiable time period. While the idea may appear futuristic, the physical appearance indicates the passage of time as evidenced in the battered and faded surfaces. The aged appearance serves as a source of comfort and familiarity for me. It is my way of translating what many view as an alien concept into a more approachable visual language. The blend of old and new finds its source in a contemporary interpretation of early science fiction film. Although imagined at the time of production as wildly futuristic, they now seem a fantastical mish-mash of past and future

CATHEDRAL SERIES

Cathedral as a term and motif was derived from the physical appearance of “cathedral” radios popularized in the early 20th century. Design of this era is consistent with the “old/new” aesthetic utilized throughout the body of work, but also offers another level of comfort as homage to my grandfather, who was a radio repairman during The Great Depression. My grandfather tinkering over antiquated radios became the imaginary scientist hinted at in my work, combining parts to generate an artificial voice. By default, pieces in this series are rife with religious overtones. Each sculpture raises an issue, finding a metaphorical partner in the underlying creation theme present throughout.

The *Cathedral Series* should be viewed as fragments of a whole. Their purpose is a test bed for concepts and techniques that denotes them both metaphorically and literally as prototypes. Figures in this series have been limited to their uppermost torsos and heads, the most basic essence of a human, containing both heart and mind. They should be considered a part of a whole, that is Beings under construction. These pieces are complete works about incomplete Beings, an aside to age-old concepts of an “imperfect man”.

Cathedral I

Cathedral I was initially conceived as an investigation of various materials and how they may interact.

Stylistically, *Cathedral I* is comprised of sleek, streamlined forms accentuated with stainless-steel fins. This appearance originates from the realization that Beings or parts manufactured in this manner would need to be marketed to a consumer, and so would be designed in an eye-catching manner. Source material is pulled from Art Deco design and the streamlined and chromed American cars of the mid-20th century.

A primary feature of this piece is its exposed teeth, which lends a menacing feel to *Cathedral I*. Teeth reference inner mechanics of a human body, drawing a parallel between a natural flesh and blood organism and the artificial machines they may become. They also relate to dentistry, particularly dentures, one of mankind's earliest attempts to replace worn out parts resulting in an increased life span. The head in *Cathedral I* is unique in that it lacks its upper cranium, and with it, a brain. *Cathedral I* represents an automaton devoid of a mind as we know it. Perhaps the figure is in an early stage of construction, or possibly it exists with some other artificial means of cognizance.



PLATE 1: "CATHEDRAL I"

32"X15"X15" Fiberglass, steel, wood, cast iron

Cathedral II

In stark contrast to *Cathedral I*, the figure in *Cathedral II* displays characteristics uniquely human. His uplifted face and serene expression seem to bask in the glow of a higher power. This indicates a self-aware Being with a spirit. The question may be asked without such a thing can one be considered a human being?

The support structure fully envelopes the head of *Cathedral II* save for his face, thus forcing the viewer to focus on his identity. The structure radiates outward in halo-like rays, reflecting a holy idea of creating Life. It is also an abstract interpretation of a Frankensteinian device necessary for imbuing life.

Cathedral II is highly referential to early science fiction imagery. Its appearance is reminiscent of advertising for Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* depicting a green-faced character with an ambiguously serene expression. *Metropolis* was one of the earliest films to depict a form of artificial life, serving as a perfect cinematic tie-in to my sculpture.



PLATE 2: "CATHEDRAL II"

32"X20"X15"

Cast Aluminum

Cathedral III

Stylistically, *Cathedral III* shares many similarities with *Cathedral I*. It incorporates a variety of themes and materials that will likely be explored in later pieces.

Of particular interest to me is the cast iron figure of *Cathedral III*. Normally I reserve metal for parts that are attached to the figure. For the figures I often use materials I view as more organic, or that may be easily manipulated into organic shapes. A metal figure became more attractive to me because of the associations implicated by the use of iron to create a traditionally flesh and blood Being. I felt “metal” flesh would clearly qualify the Being as artificial, however a decidedly organic texture was chosen for the piece. I want the viewer to question the origin of this Being; is he fully artificial or an existing form of life that has been heavily modified? As in *Cathedral I*, this person exhibits exposed teeth, however they are contained within a housing bolted directly onto the jaw. This is a crude depiction of implantation technology. Teeth are also used as a means of identification in forensic science. In this case they have been swapped out, effectively altering the person’s identity.



PLATE 3: "CATHEDRAL III"

34"X18"X18"

Cast Iron, Steel, Wood, Electroformed Copper

Solar Plexus

Solar Plexus is an offshoot of the *Cathedral Series* in that it explores many of the same themes and ideas and exists in a similar format. Again the figure is limited in presence to its torso and head focusing the viewer's attention on a "core" Being.

The support of *Solar Plexus* is based upon construction scaffolding. Anything surrounded by this type of structure is typically either under construction, or undergoing repair. This alludes to the Being as a manufactured device, being assembled piece by piece.

Utilizing the same mold as *Cathedral I*, the figure again displays the same upturned head and pleasant expression. As a result, similar implications are made about the Being in *Solar Plexus*. What makes him different is that he possesses an artificial soul.

The chest of *Solar Plexus* holds a translucent disk that glows when light is directed at the figure. I imagine artificial Beings as false and lifeless without a soul to warm the depths of their body. I have used light in this piece as a symbol for life. The radiance of light I find to be synonymous with the warmth of a living body; its brightness indicative of a spiritual glow.

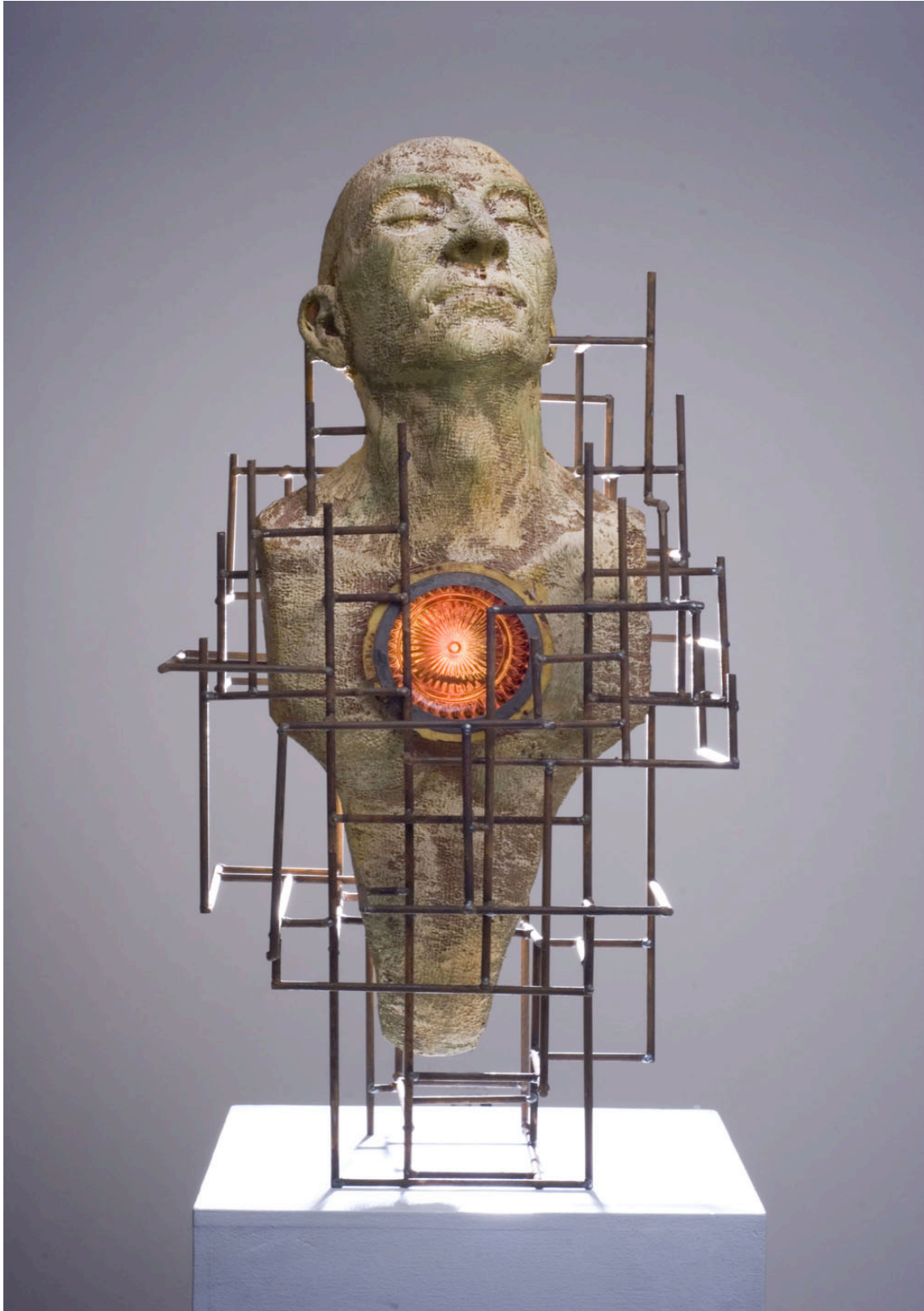


PLATE 4: "SOLAR PLEXUS"

30"X18"X15"

Fiberglass, Steel, Plaster, Found Objects, Light

THE CLOTHES MAKE THE MAN

The Clothes Make the Man is a transitional piece in the body of work, filling a niche between the newest large pieces and smaller works that dealt with replacement parts. A number of themes were explored within this piece that would mature in later works.

The Clothes Make the Man presents the idea of outward appearances and how they affect perceptions. Consequently it also involves a means of visual identification.

The intent of the piece is difficult to ascertain. It is unclear if it is a part to be incorporated into a Being, or if it is in fact a person under construction. As with *Solar Plexus*, the figure in *The Clothes Make the Man* holds in its chest a representation of an artificial soul. It is supported by a form of scaffolding, indicating it may be in the building phase.

Conversely, *The Clothes Make the Man* contains parts that suggest an improvement over the naturally evolved human. Both hands of this figure possess an additional thumb on the outer palm. One of man's most successful evolutions has traditionally been recognized as the development of the opposable thumb. It seemed natural to me that if one thumb was so good, then two thumbs must be even better. In this context, *The Clothes Make the Man* exists as an upgrade to the Human Being.

I envisioned *The Clothes Make the Man* as a store-type display, similar in function to a mannequin. Its purpose would be to advertise various modifications available to a customer. I imagined the ability to alter one's skin may be as easy one day as changing a suit of clothes.

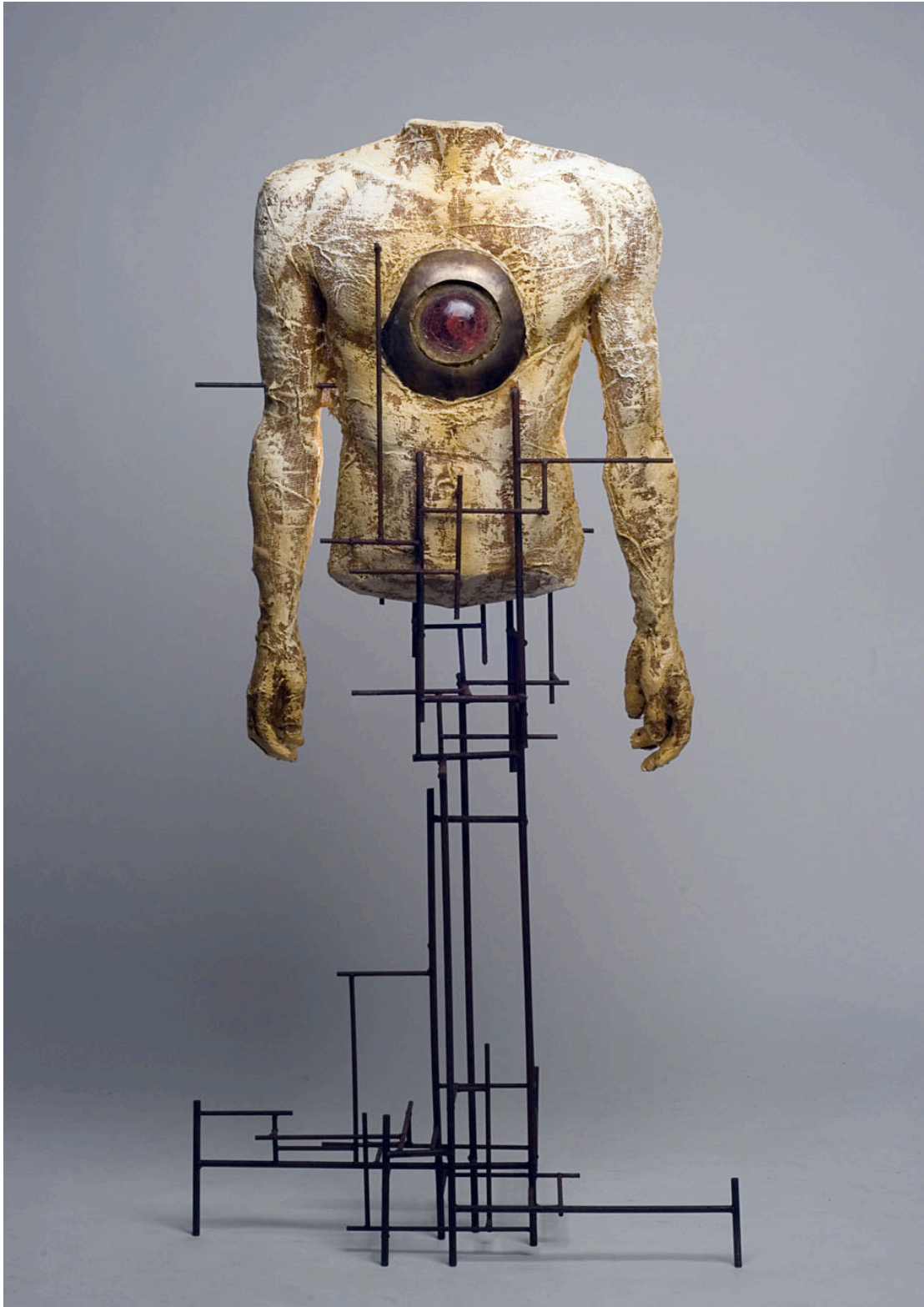


PLATE 5: "THE CLOTHES MAKE THE MAN"

60"X28"X18"

Fiberglass, Steel, Plaster, Brass, Found Object, Light

THE MANLINE

The titling of this series is intended as a direct reference to Henry Ford's earliest cars created on an assembly line. Starting with the model T, Ford's genius was in developing a way to rapidly produce complex systems utilizing relatively unskilled workers. In creating *The Manline*, I serve as the assembly line, and my individual skills take the place of many. Creation of the figures is meant to be labor intensive, a simple metaphor for a sophisticated process one would presume would be requisite in the production of an actual form of artificial life. In keeping with the mass-production ideal and the thought that a grouping of these figures would be identical, it seemed counter-productive to title the pieces in a more unique manner.

Model A

Model A was my first attempt at crafting a full figure in fiberglass. Fiberglass provided a blend of strength and light weight that made it ideal for a large suspended piece. The figure was modeled in plasticene, and then plaster molds were made from the model. The final step was laying up the fiberglass in layers, akin to the strata of human skin.

The figure in *Model A* is fresh off the assembly line, presented in a “newly activated” pose. Here I imagine it travelling along some sort of overhead conveyor through a factory. The first signs of life are evidenced in the position of her hands.

Model A is about a Being whose identity as an individual is at question. This theme is indicated by her hands, which form the sign language signals for “I” and “D”. She is a representative of an entire line of identical Beings. How can she be identified if not as a unique person?

The superstructure in *Model A* is restricted to the uppermost portion of the body, a tie-in to the *Cathedral Series*. It enters into the central core, presumably linking with an internal mechanism, and encompasses the head. Representing the idea of technology, her soul is linked back to the machine that created her. By encompassing the head of *Model A*, I hint at the effect an increasing dependence on technology may have on our identities.



PLATE 6: "MODEL A"

84"X30"X24"

Fiberglass, Plaster, Steel, Cast Aluminum

Model B

Model B incorporates themes expressed in earlier work; a need to maintain one's identity, and a fragile, hollow body in need of support.

The body is made from plaster and burlap, constructed to produce a shoddy, patchwork appearance. A more permanent material was chosen for the head, in this case iron, to express a need to maintain one's identity. The two portions are joined together rather haphazardly, plaster splattered across iron, and screws apparent as a means of mechanical fastening. One gets the impression the pieces might easily come apart under repeated use, the Being losing its identity.

Model B has a fragile body whose origin is difficult to surmise. Either it has been worn out and repaired after years of usage, or it was improperly built in the first place. Holes are visible through the mesh that creates his skin. Where eyes should be, there are only empty cavities. These two properties indicate that his body is hollow and devoid of anything save his own skin. It is said that eyes are the windows to the soul. Here I present a thing, not quite a Being, absent a fundamental qualifier of humanity.

The support structure of *Model B* is large and imposing. I had begun looking at architectural forms of support, linking the constructed aspect of large structures with the human body. In *Model B* suspension bridge trusses morph into a supporting enclosure. At first glance the figure seems to exist independently of its structure, able to leave it at will. Closer inspection reveals their union, the figure reliant on the structure's strength to endure. The superstructure exists for no reason other than to support the continued existence of the figure, which would collapse without it. At the same time, it becomes a prison, keeping the contained Being from a normal existence.



PLATE 7: "MODEL B"

84"X32"X32"

Plaster, Cast Iron, Wood, Steel, Found Objects

Model C

Model C was initially conceived to incorporate architectural ideas I saw at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. At Mass MoCA trusses and their linkages exist in a multiple, repetitive format. I was immediately struck with the sense of rhythm that seemed to give the building a life of its own. The roof support becomes the spine of the building, which I envisioned as being very similar in nature to a spinal column, complete with ribs. In *Model C*, the ceiling's architecture is re-interpreted into a spinal support.

The figure itself is purposely elongated and its shoulders are broadened in order to emphasize the spinal structure. *Model C* is unique in the series in that the figure supports itself via its own legs. The external structure of *Model C* is confining, yet in a different way. The figure's arms are pinned and restricted in their movement. He finds himself in a rather ambiguous position, free to move about on his own, yet incapable of using his own arms to interact with his surroundings.

The confined existence of *Model C* refers to the way technologies may limit our contact with the organic physical world. In today's terms this could be exemplified through the widespread use of cellular phones and texting, or through contact limited by the internet and social networking sites. In the future man may be implanted with technologies that would be requisite in the function of society, and I wonder how that may change our social nature.



PLATE 8: "MODEL C"

68"X32"28"

Fiberglass , Wood, Plaster, Steel Linkages

Model D

Model D exists as a pseudo-prototype. It was primarily a vehicle to experiment with material. *Model D* is unique in the series in that it was built in a direct manner, precluding the use of any molds. By consequence it is one of a kind, unable to be replicated.

Physically, the figure in *Model D* is presented in an incomplete state. His chest is open, and scaffolding extends into the cavity where a heart should lie, indicating continued construction. The figure's surface is rough and unrefined, as though it has been left unfinished. There is little to indicate that any life might exist within its hollow shell.

A viewer may question why *Model D* was left unfinished. This piece represents more than just one unfinished figure, instead addressing the larger idea of experimenting with humanity. A large quantity of byproducts would exist in the form of incomplete and flawed Beings, left to wonder about their own existence. This is one of the themes explored by Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein*.



PLATE 9: "MODEL D"

75"X26"X20"

Plaster, Steel, Wood

THE CONSEQUENCES OF CREATING LIFE

As previously mentioned, I had explored the use of a light as a metaphor for the evidence of life. I saw potential in the properties of freshly cast iron, and decided to use this material as a basis to create a “living” Being. The mold I envisioned as some sort of artificial womb, which I constructed in such a manner as to allow it to be opened easily. The figure was cast in its entirety, and the mold was opened while the iron was still glowing hot. In opening the mold, I cast myself as the prototypical “mad scientist”, referencing *Metropolis*’ Rotwang and the theatrical Dr. Frankenstein.

The process these characters used to imbue their creations with life was interpreted into *The Consequences of Creating Life*. The piece itself existed in a temporary state, with a resultant casting existing as a byproduct of the process. I have become increasingly interested in iron as a media, and how its unique properties may be fully integrated into a coherent work.

Hot iron gave the piece life in my eyes. Heat was analogous to the warmth of a live body; energy emitted in the light I saw as comparable to energy contained within a person. *Consequences* was imagined as a first attempt at life, one that would ultimately fail as the light faded from the body.

The figure itself is in a fetal-like position, yet it seems to be fully-grown. This reflects the popularized version of cloning, in which a fully matured adult emerges from a matrix of creation.



PLATE 10: "THE CONSEQUENCES OF CREATING LIFE"

Dimensions Variable Iron, Sand, Fire, Light

The resultant casting is cold to the touch and dark to the eyes. It seems to resemble a corpse, cold and faded. Compared to many of the other pieces it is drab and colorless. The figure was made in such a way so that layers of construction are apparent. Its surface is rough and textured, and mold lines are evident. In areas the metal failed to fill the mold, leaving rough voids in the body. This Being is far from perfect. Much like Mary Shelley's monster, he is an abomination.

The Consequences of Creating Life is meant as a warning to our culture. It expresses problems and potential results of attempting to artificially create a Being. This individual may have possessed a conscience and soul much like you or me, which would have invariably led to a tortured existence.



PLATE 11: "THE CONSEQUENCES OF CREATING LIFE"

30"X30"X26" Cast Iron

CONCLUSION

I believe that Human Beings possess three qualities that make us unique amongst the animals of our planet. We each have our own mind, identity, and soul. The mind is simple to define, as it encompasses primarily our thoughts and memories. I also associate it with freedom of thought, meaning we are each free to think whatever we may wish. Identity as well is a fairly simple matter, in that we are each readily identifiable as a unique individual. Soul is a little harder to define, though I associate it primarily with our conscience. These three qualities I feel combine together to form our consciousness, our sense of personal awareness. Through my sculpture, I ask if a thing that is absent one of these properties can be considered a true Being.

If a puzzle has pieces removed, it presents an incomplete picture. Replacing these pieces with those from another puzzle does not complete the image, nor does it improve it. This reflects my attitude on altering the Human Being. I consider the mind, identity, and soul akin to the subject of the puzzle's picture. If any of these three should be altered or removed the Being will be compromised. If a thing is made without all three, I maintain that it is not a true Being.

I realize these are not definitive answers. I have always been reluctant to provide a definitive answer for the viewer. I find it presumptuous to say "this is the way it is" when, in all honesty, I do not know myself. My sculpture represents nothing more than possibilities, and each piece only one possible outcome.

Science has advanced to a point where damaged body parts can be replaced. Soon they may be replaced with pieces that are better than the original. I wonder how this will change our

identity, and if it will weaken our soul. Science may replace our broken identities, but I doubt they could fix a broken soul. After all, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

GLOSSARY

Assembly line: A process for turning out a finished product in a mechanically efficient manner.

Excellent for producing large quantities.

Automaton: A machine or control mechanism designed to follow automatically a predetermined sequence of operations or respond to encoded instructions. An automaton operates without a mind of its own.

Being: A human being or person, having a conscious, mortal existence. I associate the term with the non-physical aspects of the Human Being.

Figure: A bodily shape or form of a person. I associate the term with the physical body.

Human Condition: Mankind's desire to find "the meaning of life"; the desire to discover who we are and what it means to be human. It is responsible for the drive to improve ourselves.

Identity: The distinguishing character or personality of an individual. The way we recognize ourselves and others as individuals. I primarily associate it with the face.

Implant: To insert in living tissue for the purpose of forming a union.

Mind: The conscious mental capabilities of a person. I associate it with the brain.

Prototype: An original model on which something is patterned.

Scaffold: A temporary platform for workers, normally used in construction or repair of architecture.

Soul: The moral and emotional nature of human beings; our conscience. I loosely associate it with the heart.

